

'THE 9TH COMPANY': WAR IN RUSSIAN CINEMA IN 2005

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film
review

The 9th Company by Fyodor Bondarchuk (born in 1967, son of the eminent Soviet director Sergey Bondarchuk), a film about the war in Afghanistan, has earned 20 million US dollars at the box office (from 5,227,404 viewers) and another 3 million dollars from the sale of DVDs. It received the national Golden Eagle film prize as the best fiction film and the Russian Cinema Academy's first prize, the Golden Ram.

This success with the public, critics, and cinema professionals prompts one to ask what this agreement between Russian viewers and the artistic elite is based on. The much-celebrated rebirth of Russian cinema (expressed in record box office sales and budgets) goes hand in hand with a revival of the Soviet narrative canon and of the former role of the artist as a creator of mass spectacles.

The film is set in 1989 – the war in Afghanistan is in its ninth year. The main characters of the film – the aspiring teacher 'Vorobushek' (Little Sparrow), the aspiring painter 'Gioconda' (Mona Lisa), the ragamuffin 'Lyuty' (the Fierce One) and the fatherless Stas – meet at the muster. In the camp where they are trained before being sent off to the front, they acquire not only military skills but also a conception of real male friendship and generally about the way life works.

The multi-ethnic 9th company, to which they are assigned, is going to be annihilated. The only survivor (Lyuty) later finds out that his comrades died by an oversight of the command, defending a hill even though Moscow had decided to withdraw its troops. The film's ending highlights the fundamentally irreconcilable levels of the narrative: the responsibility of the command – in the general sense of the word – for the pointless war and the disintegration of the country, and the greatness of the common soldier – the warrior who gives his life in the line of duty.

THE CINEMA INDUSTRY AND THE NARRATIVE
CANON

The figures and facts about the production and distribution of the film are used as an important, if not the central, argument in support of its artistic quality. The film's self-presentation (on its web site, www.9rota.ru/flashindex.html) and critics' reviews systematically mention the film's budget (9 million US dollars), the all-star cast (including Fyodor Bondarchuk, Mikhail Porechenkov and Alexander Lykov), as well as the actors' training for the shots (with accounts of what they did and how much time they spent on it), the high sound and image quality and the special effects.

The heroic mode of remembering war in the post-Soviet area (present in the film through the hero's death) is directly linked to the role of victory in the Great Patriotic War and the positive significance accorded to the Soviet period.

Of course, *The 9th Company* is not 'the first real war film in Russia' as its official web site contends. From the early 2000s, there have been many films and series about the Great Patriotic War and the wars in the Caucasus. The first new award-winning war film was Nikolai Lebedev's *Star* (2002), a remake of a film of the same name released in 1949. *The 9th Company* includes references to the new Russian war films, uses actors in roles similar to those other directors had cast them in, includes well-tried plot elements and, most importantly, draws on the theme of the greatness of a person who sacrifices himself to fulfil a mission, a stock plotline from Soviet times that was not revised in the 1990s.

THE RUSSIAN MASS VIEWING PUBLIC

Knowledge of the contents of the TV schedule is universal in contemporary Russian society. The majority of Russians spend most of their free time

film
review

watching television. And in many ways, the success of *The 9th Company* is linked to the fact that the film was designed as a product geared to TV viewers. Although it is a big-screen film, TV adverts played a major role in generating the hype that surrounded it. Moreover, the cinema text makes ample use of TV formats.

The first part – about two thirds of the film – shows the recruits training for combat. The plot elements and shot angles hark back most clearly to Stanley Kubrick's anti-war film *Full Metal Jacket*. But many techniques used in this part of the film are determined by TV genres, another factor that has contributed to the film's sensational success.

The director twice uses slow motion in scenes of rejoicing (as in replays of crucial moments in sports broadcasts), the first time in a scene where punishment is averted, the second time when the

trainees seize a hill in a drill. In a duel scene between 'Vorobushek' and Stas, the camera movements and the montage of the scene are reminiscent of boxing broadcasts.

A music-video aesthetic (in a broad sense meaning any series of brief shots put to music) is used at the very beginning of the film, in the seeing-off scene (where the viewers become acquainted with the characters) and in the first third of the film's last part, in a scene without words, set to music, where a file of armoured vehicles sets out on the road (close-up shots of the equipment and soldiers, exotic landscapes and long shots of the armoured units in the mountains), to be interrupted by an attack. A successful device used in this scene is that the repeatedly shouted-out orders blend in with the episode's musical score.

The presence of comedy scenes in the heroic

PUTIN ON 'THE 9TH COMPANY'

On 7 November 2005, President Putin received the crew of *The 9th Company* in his residence in Novo-Ogarevo. In addition to an intensive commercial publicity campaign, this unusual step may have contributed to the film's great success. Here are some extracts from Putin's speech to Fyodor Bondarchuk:

'Fyodor Sergeevich, first of all I would like to thank you.

I think this is a very good film. [...] Like any work of art, it does of course betray the fact that it is not a piece of life, but a piece of creative work. But in my view it is very close to life. At least judging from what I know, from what I've heard.

Of course, this is a tragic story in the life of our country and our people. But the people who were fighting there, upholding the ideals that took them there – I shall not judge this now, that is a different matter – did it with dignity. And – to say it in a lofty style – they did it in the best traditions of the Russian host: displaying their strong will, in a spirit of self-sacrifice, and very efficiently; we must give them their due for that. And indeed, what you show at the end is very true: the soldiers who fought there won their battle, that's a fact.

And I would like to thank you and all the boys who made that film. I think it is a work of great talent, because it touches one's heart [...] One remembers, of course, the events of the Great Patriotic War, but then one finds that the generation of the 70s–80s could act in an equally heroic manner, as you have now shown in your film.

[...] This is a deep work about war and about people who find themselves in extreme conditions. And in my opinion you have shown this very fittingly.'

Source: www.kremlin.ru/text/appears/2005/11/96802.shtml

film
review

drama that is *The 9th Company* can only be understood if we relate them to TV reality. The plastic phallus that is the central object in an episode about sabotage training resonates with an idea of humour that has been shaped by numerous TV comedy shows.

The 9th Company differs from *Star* (the previous box-office record holder among war films) by the size of its budget, and thus by the number of crowd scenes and special effects (the film's central and most expensive stunt is the explosion of a 450,000 dollar airplane).

The film's topic – the war in Afghanistan – is tackled in fewer Russian films than the Chechen wars and the Great Patriotic War. But the particularity of that war is levelled out by the main theme of this film – the sacrifice of characters that viewers have become fond of in the first part of the film. This familiar plotline effaces the differences between the wars, putting them on a par with each other. It no longer matters whether the soldiers died for an existing or an ephemeral empire. And, although many character types are known to Russian viewers from previous films, in *The 9th Company* they look somewhat different. The tone is set by Fyodor Bondarchuk himself in

the role of lieutenant 'Khokhol' (the Ukrainian). The glamorous attractiveness of the characters, shaped by a TV and glossy magazine aesthetic, undoubtedly distinguishes them from the positive cinema characters of 2002. Thus *The 9th Company* may be called a large-scale patriotic cinema project that is in line with aesthetic preferences developed by television. This recipe meets the tastes of the majority of Russian viewers.

Translated from the Russian

by *Mischa Gabowitsch*

READING SUGGESTIONS:

Lev Gudkov: The fetters of victory. How the war provides Russia with its identity, www.eurozine.com/articles/2005-05-03-gudkov-en.html

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